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RESEARCH ARTICLE

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS AND BRAND COMMUNICATION DURING COVID-19 CRISIS IN INDIA

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Abstract

Social media has created a huge impact on marketing strategies of almost all the industries worldwide. The deeper penetration of internet coupled with affordable smart phones has leveled up the entire process of reaching the existing and prospective customers. During the pandemic (after lockdown was imposed), there has been great surge in consumption of social media. So social media became the appropriate platform for projection of branding activities and marketing techniques as through social media platforms they are easy to understand, quickly grasped, widely shared and can also be measured. Many brands used their old advertisements to which the audiences could connect due to nostalgia. The fact that most of the communication taking place through these platforms is real-time and is mostly consumer-driven, helps engaging more people and allows room for innovation in content creation. Online presence of brands across social media platforms has opened new horizons of opportunities for brands to combat some effects of the pandemic and infodemic with innovative strategies. User-generated content, influencer-marketing are some of the strategies that have been well-received by the netizens. However, the key to drive a successful social media strategy is seen to be continual responses to the existing and potential customers and prepare for future while learning from present situation. This helped in dealing with the pandemic and 'infodemic'. Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, Twitter, Whats App, LinkedIn, Snapchat, Pinterest and like, provide explicit prospects for brand management and user-engagement. This study explores the potential of social media for brand communications' during the covid-19 crisis in India.

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Introduction:-

The uncertain and unpredicted circumstances which are being witnessed at present due to Corona Virus 2019 (Covid-19) have given rise to changes in communication strategies for various brands. Social media is a quintessential platform where brands get an opportunity to make a note of the preferences of their customers and maintain a record of it too. The extent of social media is enormous and is growing fast. During the second phase of lockdown, usage of social media increased by almost five hours per day from an average of three hours per day (Keelery, 2020). Along with geographical targeting, social media platforms may also aim for behavioral and special interest groups. Organisations are aware of the need to understand the effects of social media on brand perception (Kumar et al., 2016). It helps a brand to reach its target group in a cost-effective manner. Some people

who have time constraints can be effectively reached through social media and not through traditional media. Brands have been grappling with changing need to reach audience with carefully planned messages having a positive approach to be able to empathize with common emotions of people.

Adeptly reaching more audience is the key aspect of social media. Audience engagement and well-timed responses help brands to proactively be present at all times. The altering sentiments of users persuade brands to communicate in real-time. The immediate and bespoke reply makes social media stand out in terms of consumer satisfaction, but they must be done with utmost care. The use of social media platforms is not only restricted to produce brand promoters but it also provides opportunities to offer better customer support. Through social media there are many chances to improve brand reputation and to provide more focused customer service. It is particularly necessary to have a cognizant engagement and communication with users that is real-time and clear. Given the large scale of use of social media, there is a lack of research analyzing the influence of multiple social media platforms. (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2015; Keller, 2016; Gürhan-Canli et al., 2016).

Brand reputation across different social media platforms can be studied through various tools, websites and applications available now days. Responses from users are monitored across all social media platforms are evaluated to categorize positive, negative and neutral attitude. Bronner & Hoog (2010), BambauerSachse & Mangold (2010) recommend constant monitoring of word-of-mouth communication. The practice provides a wider picture to recognize the needs of the users and their outlook. With the help of this practice brands are able to take curative measures to offer improved product and services. While brand managers are aware of the opportunities presented by social media, there is a lack of knowledge regarding developing effective digital marketing strategy for improving brand image. (Hanna, R.; Rohm, A.; Crittenden, V.L., 2011)

As they say, data is the new oil. Smart and effective utilization of overall customer-profile based analytics generation and in-depth study being used will take forward instantaneous remarketing strategies. This process may create appropriate, focused and more personalized proposals as next to general and non focused offers. Marketing schemes carried forward through social media will go on evolving particularly concentrating on social business aiming profits escalation, brand advocacy, and form original consumer segments and more involved customer engagement. Tactfully planned communication having a sensitive approach has been well received by the consumers.

Major parts of marketing budgets comprises of mobile based marketing strategies which is due to easier and affordable access to smart phones and faster data connection plans. Creation of mobile apps which are more focused towards consumer engagement and regular interaction is becoming a well-received practice and provide large scope of innovation.

E-commerce is relatively easier and much safer than what it was during the initial years ago and had gained a lot of popularity. Larger practice of search engine marketing, re-marketing and affiliate marketing, has helped not only to contend in the market and drive online sales but also to generate effective branding strategies and improve brand awareness.

The digital platforms have myriad opportunities. The remarkable prospective to utilize the scope of social media to improve online presence but it has to be significant and worthwhile to the target audience. An important initiative has been to improve online sales using social media, brands having common objective are brought together to do this.

Objectives:-

1. To understand the underlying factors of effective brand communication during Covid-19 crisis.
2. To investigate the steps for successful brand communication through social media.
3. To study the scope of social media platforms to carry out effective brand communication during Covid-19 crisis.

Research Methodology:-

The researcher used case study method to attain the desired objectives. It helped the researcher to implement in-depth and detailed evaluation of the existing changes in brand communications through different social media platforms.

Findings

According to the objectives the findings of the study were as follows

Scope of branding through social media

Face book and YouTube have provided a great platform for brand management but have also become a great challenge for the brands in the current times. Brands prepared themselves with looking deep into their social media strategies. It has helped brands to surpass the traditional media regarding reaching their audience in a more direct and personalized way. To connect to community of consumers efforts are made by sharing great stories in real time. In spite of these arduous efforts few brands could reap the benefits. The disadvantages of social networks include the possibility of receiving negative feedback, which can also spread rapidly and be destructive. (Brech, F.M.; Messer, U.; Vander Schee, B.A.; Rauschnabel, P.A.; Ivens, B.S. J. Mark 2017) (Felix, R.; Rauschnabel, P.A.; Hinsch, C)

A noticeable example was by Coca Cola, which promoted social distancing by actually tweaking their logo and putting gaps between the alphabets. They often used Facebook and Twitter to share and communicate. Since every social media platform has a different reach and scope so the message must be designed with utmost care.

Another important case is of the sports brand, Nike, which promoted the hashtag play inside (#playinside), to lay emphasis on the importance of physical and mental health and promote the message of lockdown to stay indoors. People were able to understand the message and relate to the approach as the chosen medium was appreciated by the consumers.

'Tide', a known brand for laundry detergents, started trending with #Angelsinwhite. This was to honor the healthcare workers (as they are commonly dressed in white). This sentiment also was well received because people did understand the value of their tremendous hard work during these times.

The possible reason for this is the link between culture and branding. Brands can penetrate in the target group when they find some cultural relevance. Social media has not given rise to new networking platforms but also transformed the way people relate with culture. Netizens play a crucial and inexhaustible role in exploring the way between culture and social media. This helps in understanding a lot of trends, the ways in which a brand's social media strategy works or not and unconventional branding techniques that are supported by social media. The consumers' ability to communicate with one another, limits the amount of control brands have over the content and dissemination of information. (Tucker, C.E., 2014)

The advancements in new media technology has empowered the users and spoiled them for choice. Audience can easily opt out of advertisements and this is a huge challenge for brands. One of the ways out was creation of short videos for internet. This technique helped for a while during the earlier stages. These early adopted methods made brands to consider that if they provide remarkably creative content at usual internet speed, they could attract large numbers of engaged audiences to their brands. Following this, there was the great attention diverted to branded content. This much required content is largely derived from the crowd instead of well known media companies. The enormous potential of social media has brought together the once geographically remote communities and lead to drastically soaring the speed and concentration of association. Bringing greatly together, the once-distant communities has created an impact on their cultural manipulations making it more straight and significant.

The content which is sourced from the crowds has increased user participation along with the pace and quality of conversations. Social media has empowered consumers possibilities to create content (Muniz & Schau, 2011, Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), therefore consumers are no longer passive acceptors of press releases and information about products (Li & Bernhoff, 2008). This type of content is more relatable by the audience and quickly surfaces gathering most consumer attraction becoming viral (spreading across social media at a swift pace). The best part being that its production is less costly too. Social media is observed as consumer generated media that covers a variety of new sources of online information, created and used by consumers with an objective of sharing information. (Blackshaw & Nazzaro, 2004)

Well-aware consumers are unwilling to believe online brand messaging. Social media influencers have managed to influence the consumers' mind. They are distinguished individuals who have their personal style and ability to catch the attention of huge number of consumers. This influencer marketing trend has changed a lot in branding strategies. As they have a huge fan following on social media as bloggers/ vloggers and people are usually curious to know more about them like what brands of clothes they wear, where they travel, beauty products they use and whom do they follow to inspire their followers. Gradually more marketers seek for occasions to connect with their consumers by including their products and brands in influencers' discourse with their followers.

Social media is often considered a low costing advertising medium. In this view, an influencer follows a part of brand's strategy to drive sales and increase brand awareness by putting up posts across social media platforms. Most often brands consider influencers on the bases of the number of their followers. Over the time they have been also recognized as brand ambassadors. This makes an influencer a core part of branding strategy. They are more involved in the entire activity as their style and voice becomes strong part of the branding activity. It is important to note that this approach does increase the cost of the entire plan and involves more indigenously created strategies. This also calls for new ways to track the progress and responses to the approach in performance based qualitative and quantitative metric.

Factors of effective communication through social media for brand communication

The emerging market in India has grabbed global attention in the recent years. It has been a stronghold for renowned consumer packaged goods. These have explored numerous ways to connect with wide consumer base. The number of active social media users has surpassed 3.8 billion and this figure rises by about than 9 percent. Number of social media users has surged enormously and that is the reason why it is very prominent part of many brands' strategies.

One of the oldest existing brands, 'Amul', has set forth a brilliant example of simple communication but enormous impact. Amul has used Twitter in a productive manner to empathize with people. When a brand reflects the common sentiment and gives an important instruction or message, it is usually able to earn conviction of the consumers.

Social media comes across as a straight choice to showcase a brand's personality, globally. Simplest way is to create a tone of voice for the brand, work on its verbal identity and share views about it. When starting a new campaign, it is vital for the followers to know about the opinions of the brand's strategists. This not only makes for a good content but also helps in user engagement because there is an interesting conversation about an impending prospect with a human element so consumers are sure that they're being acknowledged. There is amplification of reputation with the aid of social media over traditional mediums (Barwise & Meehan, 2010).

With most of the market places, shopping malls and public gathering places being shut down, social media influencers carried out the heavy weight lifting for various brands. Taking examples of WHO through #DudewithAsign campaign, which was a huge success in spreading awareness about corona virus, the potential of the medium can be easily gauged. Another significant one was #handwashchallenge through which many celebrities promoted the importance of washing hands from time to time to avoid the disease. 'Mother Dairy' teamed up with famous comedian Zakir Khan and released a video, it was trending on Facebook on Mother's Day, which was titled 'Maa ke Haath Ka Khana'. It was a short video which was sensitive to the current times with an emotional appeal.

People enjoy variety, so when they are provided with different types of content, it appears interesting for them to explore it further. Here, it is necessary for the brand's management to make a decision for what do they want the brand to be recognized for, on social media. This can include options like uploading 360 videos on Face book. This can easily attract attention from the users. Another favorable way is to upload Go Pro technique of videos. Since it provides a point of view of it becomes relatable for the viewers and is well-received by them. To bring focus to one aspect of footage cinemagraphs turn out to be very effective.

Carousel posts club together various links in one post giving an opportunity for different brand to display its various products with a single post on social media. GIFs and memes have been winning audience attention since its introduction. This has worked out effectively in case of Twitter and Instagram. Use of hashtags to surface with keywords and stay trending for audience attention is another widely used successful trend. Displaying more than one image through collages is another successful demonstration of giving out multiple pieces of information through one post. Another interesting way is put stories on platforms like Instagram or upload very short videos with really crisp content. However, it is imperative to understand which type of content works for which social media platform. On each

social media platform, the audience is different. For a platform like LinkedIn the posts have to be strictly professional in nature. Every type of content must be designed keeping the audience in mind.

To nurture a significant relationship with the audience it is important to devote time and understand which platforms are most accessed by the target audience. Targeting the correct audience type will offer a prospective growth opportunity and to excel in consumer service experience. When consumers experience best services it adds to the brand loyalty. According to information provided on Statista, in the age group of 18-24 there are over 100million of users of Facebook in India. Whatsapp users account to 49 percent from the age group 18-25. There were as much as 155430000 users of Instagram in the age group of 18-29 in India by January 2019. The number of Twitter users across the country was estimated to be over 34 million in 2019 among the age group of 18-29 years.

Social media can also assist brands in realizing the needs of the consumers, their opinions and how the brand is perceived. One of the many ways to do this is to engage in interesting discussion with the target audience. Looking at consumer's profiles can also reveal a lot relevant information for the brand. By making apt use of customer feedback, brands can fine-tune their marketing strategy in accordance with the consumers' requirements. Constant monitoring of competitors' branding activities also provides insights to various ways of improving strategies. Social media age is rapidly evolving so it is crucial to stay ahead of competitors and offer exclusive content to the audience through social media.

There many Competitor analysis tools accessible online through which a brand can proactively monitor the comparison of activities of its competitor on social media. This is very helpful as it provides information about most or least engaging social media posts and on top of it there are also updates regarding competitors' exclusive activities. This can be made use of by following the trend if it is feasible for the brand or something completely different can be discovered to stand out. Constant evaluation of the performance of the posts is indispensable, a brand must not continue with a post that is not well-received by the audience.

Steps for successful brand communication through social media

When content of brand is shared by social media users it surfaces prominently on various platforms. It supports the visibility of brand and is well suited for search engine optimization depicting as a leader among the existing brands. The scope of such awareness based posts can be explored across multiple social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and like with the use of relatable hashtags and most used keywords with them. Social network users rely on the advice they receive from other users (Schmitt et al., 2011). It must be noted that content which is created with this purpose must be something that the target groups want to read or else people will not share it.

Social distancing was overtaken by virtual connections. Applications like Zoom and MS Teams recorded highest consumptions since their inception. Same was the situation for many gaming apps, which recorded a spike. This may have also been referred to as over connectedness but through these people have connected more than ever.

A surge was noted in videos related to cooking. Many brands including 'Ashirwad' released open access cooking tutorials and celebrity chefs were soon to catch up to the personal branding by uploading lots videos on Youtube.

Most of the major brands have a presence on social media. It is essential to provide a brand existence on social media through any possible way, to open an opportunity to expose the brand to more customer than otherwise. Social media platforms can persuade prospective customers to undertake the product or service as there can be real time feedback also. Online consumers listen to opinions published in blogs, reviews and discussion forums (Olenski, 2013). One way to enhance the process is by tagging existing and prospective consumers and engaging them by sharing information and asking their views. However, this must be done carefully so as not to present the brand as a promotion device, for social media platforms are spaces for customers to engage according to their preferences rather than providing reasons for being interested or not interested in a product or a service. This way, The Times of India made efforts to spread awareness through their #MASKINDIA initiative.

In order let organic content reach the target audience and further, brands make use of paid services to promote it. This type of paid-for content must become the focus of contemplation when brands plan their organic social media strategy as it will provide permanence to the promotion and reveal burgeoning reach, audience engagement and return of investment.

Conclusion:-

During the Covid-19 crisis prudent use of social media for brand communication was a significant approach. Regular communication both internally and externally (employees and consumers) was an effective stride to dispel any kind of anxiety. Optimistic messages on social and consistent assistance to stakeholder helped strengthen people's trust in their brands. Brands which have been genuine with their consumers and have taken initiatives to explore their rationale amidst these difficult times have not only been able to weather the storm but have been able to tide over the emergency in an enhanced manner unlike their competitors.

Social media provides numerous opportunities to bring users to the brand's website by disseminating its content to related networks. The more engagement of these posts, the more coverage they receive; it would result in probably more hits on the brand's website. The website's traffic which is originated through social media is monitored by using tools like Google Analytics, which let the brands identify the posts that have been main traffic drivers. This detail is useful to specify the ways social media helps generate return on investment by using different posts.

On the whole, it is evident that social media possesses a strong positive impact when it comes to promoting and managing a brand. The social media sphere does not depict any signals of slowing down; therefore it is necessary for brands to carefully plan their social media strategies and begin reaping the benefits.

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